2008

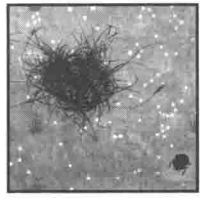
Museum Careers: A Practical Guide for Students and Novices

N. Elizabeth Schlatter
University of Richmond, eschlatt@richmond.edu

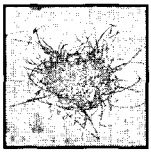
MUSEUM CAREERS

A Practical Guide for Students and Novices

N. Elizabeth Schlatter



Left Coast Press Inc.
Walnut Creek, California



INTRODUCTION

WHY WORK IN A MUSEUM?

The museum where I work owns a print by American artist John Biggers (1924–2001) that I visit every time I enter our collections storage area. Titled "The Midnight Hour," the print is too sensitive to light damage to display permanently. Biggers gained widespread recognition for his accomplishments as an artist and teacher and was acclaimed for his depiction of African and African American themes. What pulls me into "The Midnight Hour," however, is not just the artist's trademark patterns, rich symbols, or rhythm of his abstracted forms, but a frankly narcissistic association I have with Biggers and my museum career. As an undergraduate gallery assistant, one of the first exhibitions I ever installed was a traveling show of Biggers's artwork. To this day, I recall hanging a particularly lush and entrancing painting and thinking, "This is what I want to do. This is it."

My early inklings of interest in museum work are typical of many in the profession, because working for a museum is both an altruistic yet selfish calling, dedicated to public education and enrichment. Typically, museums require hard work from an employee and offer relatively low or modest compensation. But museum workers have careers that feed their passions and expose them to new ideas, fascinating objects, and creative, stimulating environments. Even the crankiest museum staffers, who have been toiling away at a single institution their entire adult lives, will probably acknowledge they receive some sort of pleasure by working in a museum, such as passing an astounding dinosaur fossil or a beguiling Renaissance painting every time they walk to the accounting office or finding very hip and creative toys for their grandchildren in the museum gift store.

This interest in museum work, combined with a relatively small number of available positions, has resulted in a highly competitive environment for entry-, mid-, and senior-level jobs. A 2006 survey by the American Association of Museums (AAM) found that the median number of paid full-time staff at museums is six, and 6% of the respondent museums have no paid staff at all! Job seekers need a strategy to find

openings and position themselves as strong candidates in the field of their choice, such as public relations, education, or curating.

There's no one direct route to a museum job. Although this may seem frustrating, it's actually very liberating, as people from all different backgrounds with a variety of skills and knowledge can become museum employees. The traditional trajectory still applies: Get an advanced degree, get an internship, get a job. But you'll find that some people discovered the museum world after gaining experience and skills acquired in other sectors, such as editing, gardening, teaching, and managing computer systems.

The goal of this book is to help you with that strategy from start to finish. You'll learn about different types of museum jobs, what kind of education and experience they require, where to find job listings, how to apply for jobs and conduct interviews, and how to begin your museum career. You'll read quotes from museum professionals who, unless otherwise noted, were interviewed for this publication and were eager to share their advice and experience.

You will not read declarative phrases such as "There are five critical positions in a museum. ... " or "To get a job as a registrar you need to ..." Instead, you'll find words and phrases like "may have," "probably are," and "most agree that," because there are many paths to becoming a museum professional. In fact, there's been a debate about whether museum work is a profession in itself or if museums are staffed by people working in various professions like accounting, public relations, publishing, etc. Regardless of the path you take, the rewards of museum work will be worth the effort.

REASONS PEOPLE WORK IN MUSEUMS

LOVE OF OBJECTS

If asked, many museum workers will probably cite a love of objects as a primary motivation for working in museums. Scott Schweigert, director of the Suzanne H. Arnold Art Gallery at Lebanon Valley College, Annville, Pennsylvania, chose the museum field over teaching art history full time because he was "seduced by the materiality of the objects. ... I like keeping company with the results of an artist's creativity. So for me, being in a room filled with artwork held (and still holds) tremendous appeal; so much to look at, investigate, and learn."

LOVE OF MUSEUMS

For some people in the field, their passion is quite simply the idea of museums—from the history of these special institutions to the psychology behind exhibition display to the multifaceted means to connect with the visitor. Many have received advanced degrees in museum studies or museum education; they read the magazine *Museum* cover to cover; and they regularly attend industry conferences to learn the latest developments in marketing strategies, fundraising campaigns, and exhibition display techniques. Having worked in museums for more than fifteen years, Carolynne Harris, a strategic planning consultant in Washington, DC, says:

> I love the fact that in working for museums, I am constantly exposed to new subject matter and enjoy thinking about the many choices that are made in presenting objects and ideas to an increasingly diverse public. I still find the big picture of museum work to be fascinating—to work on something that has the potential to truly inspire is a gift.

POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

A memorable childhood visit to a museum is commonly cited as an important influence in choosing to work in this field. Lauren Telchin Katz, planning specialist in the Office of the Director at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (Washington, DC) recalls:

> My mother took me to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York when I was around 7 or 8 years old. I remember trying to touch the magnificent sphinx in the Egyptian art gallery to see if it was real. A security guard yelled at me not to touch it and I realized that this was a special kind of place. You could not touch things here—they were different and precious. This was an entirely new concept for my grabby fingers. I also remember that it was quiet—like a library—but much more exciting. People were busy looking at artifacts rather than reading or chatting. ... I started paying attention to what I was looking at instead of complaining that my feet hurt.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

The majority of museum professionals are motivated by the opportunity to engage the public, from a town's school system to the nation's top scholars. In its code of ethics for museums, the AAM succinctly defines the role of all museums as making a "unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world." Museums fulfill this function in myriad ways, such as at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, where the staff collects oral histories from the state's residents, at the Tallahassee Museum of History and Natural Science, Florida, which teaches children about the importance of understanding and preserving the natural environment, or at the Frick Collection in New York, where staff offer free lectures about eighteenth-century Baroque sculpture to museum visitors.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Because a museum is a center of informal learning for visitors, its employees can continuously explore their curiosity and passion for knowledge. Personally, I love art, and in my job I learn about art from different times and cultures to share its history and meaning with our visitors and its relevance to their lives today. As museum scientist and director of life sciences at the Science Museum of Virginia, Richmond, Eugene G. Maurakis enjoys

> the freedom to develop and conduct research projects in evolutionary and environmental science, using fishes as my organisms of choice. Additionally, the variety of research and programs that I am allowed to develop, fund, conduct, and publish, also are the basis of creating engaging, fun and challenging activities for visitors of the museum.

ENGAGING WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Because they attract creative and intelligent employees, museums encourage work environments that are innovative and invigorating—yet at times infuriating. Leading a dozen ingenious staff members can be a nightmare for a director trying to create a financially feasible strategic plan. Ellen Efsic, director of development at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston has noticed a recent shift in which, she says,

more individuals with strong corporate backgrounds are taking leadership roles in nonprofits, and people with the arts background and passion are making an effort to study best practices in both corporate and nonprofit arenas. It works best where there's a combination of both.

THE DRAWBACKS OF MUSEUM WORK

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

The opportunity to explore interests in art, education, history, and science and share this knowledge with the public motivates many people to make sacrifices to work in the museum industry. The primary sacrifice is money. For some people, museum salaries, especially starting rates, are simply too low to pay for basic needs, much less to be able to support a family. Because personnel costs are often the largest expense category for museums, salaries are often the first place museums look to minimize costs.

A quick overview of various salary surveys reveals that, not surprisingly, directors make the most money and retail clerks the least. (See Appendixes One and Two for examples from different salary surveys.) You can think of the totality of museum jobs in terms of a pyramid; at the bottom are the most jobs, which also have the lowest pay rates, from the $15,000s to the mid-$20,000s. These include entry-level positions such as assistants and service type jobs such as retail clerks, housekeeping, and security guards. The number of jobs shrinks as salaries rise, reaching the apex, which is an elite group of directors of very large, wealthy museums located in urban centers. They are paid in the six-figure range or more, including benefits and incentive packages.

Approximately twice a year, posters on the Museum-L listserve for museum professionals enter into a raging debate on why museum jobs pay so little and what can be done about it. Cited reasons include societal attitudes toward the "value" of museum work, the low salaries of all types of education-related jobs, the overuse of interns and volunteers, and the outdated idea that people working in museums are independently wealthy. Unfortunately, at this time, it's an employer's job market in the museum field. Museums can afford to offer low salaries because there are so many people eager to just get their foot in the door.

HOURS AND WORKLOAD

Museum employees often find themselves saddled with heavy workloads and mandatory overtime with after-hours programs or events. For staff who love their work, the days pass too quickly and they wish they had extra time to tackle their duties and accomplish their goals. As you move up the career ladder, even more time is demanded by the organization. For example, over the course of three days, a development director might work a full day, attend a private reception for major donors that evening, work another full day followed by an exhibition preview for members that night, present a new fundraising strategy at a breakfast meeting for board members the next day, all the while putting in additional hours preparing a grant application with an upcoming deadline.

GEOGRAPHIC LIMITATIONS

Another challenge for a person dedicated to a life in museums is the limited number of opportunities within their community, because of the limited number of museums in that community. For example, in a 2002 AAM survey, 71% of the responding science centers were based in large- or medium-size cities, 26% are in small cities or suburban towns, and only 3% hailed from small towns or rural/farm areas. A person dreaming of being a designer of the latest hi-tech science exhibitions will probably have to live in an urban center to find employment at an appropriate museum or design firm.

Even within cities, there may be few institutions in your chosen subject specialty. For example, if you want to devote your life to sharing your love of airplanes from World War II with others and you live in San Diego, chances are you'll want to work at the San Diego Air and Space Museum, but it may not have any job openings when you are seeking employment. Finding a comparable position in another museum might require relocating to another part of the country. However, if you are equally interested in teaching others about humanity's inventions and accomplishments, you might find a job as an educator at San Diego's Museum of Man, the Museum of Art, or the Hall of Champions Sports Museum.

Moving for any type of job can result in feeling like you are always in a steep learning curve, not just in the work environment but also in terms gaining a sense of a new city and forging new relationships. But

Ellen Efsic, who has worked at several institutions throughout her career, rightly notes that relocating "is often a faster track to promotion and compensation in the field." She says the main advantage to career growth attained by moving is being able to "gather a wide variety of experiences, learn lots of different nonprofit models, and make many contacts both professionally and personally."

There can also be perks to staying in one place. Until Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, Daniel Piersol spent twenty-five years moving up the ladder through five different positions at the New Orleans Museum of Art to become the Doris Zemurray Stone Curator of Prints and Drawings. "If you're any good you build a reputation and gain the trust of the director, staff and trustees and you can really build up a great department and leave your stamp on it," he says. Some people refer to this as job equity that can only be developed by becoming a fixture of an institution and the local community. Ideally, your hard work and creativity will be recognized with promotions and raises. After the hurricane, Piersol's museum was forced to layoff the majority of the staff and he became the deputy director for programs at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson.

But don't become too bogged down in the good versus the bad of museum work just yet. If you've picked up this book, chances are you have found something fascinating or exciting about museums already, and now you need to learn how you can turn your curiosity into a plan of action. The first step is to consider what types of museums may interest you and what opportunities they provide.